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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the LATTICE (Linking All Types of Teachers to International Cross-Cultural Education) project, which has been bringing together Michigan public school teachers, international students, and internationally oriented faculty from Michigan State University for several years. Through LATTICE, participants can learn about other educational systems and cultures via directed group discussion with international students and teachers as well as by actually visiting classrooms and teaching lessons. At monthly meetings, a topic is presented to trigger discussion between groups. At the end of the presentation, there are small group discussions that focus on assigned provocative questions related to the main topic. The group then reconvenes, and a representative from each small group shares their conversations. Participants complete a brief survey on what they learned from the session. By hearing how other cultures teach their children, LATTICE participants discover differences between and similarities among educational systems. Some of the benefits of LATTICE include: it exposes people to other cultures and coordinates resources; it supplements international comparative reports with background information; it offers non-competitive comparisons of educational systems; and it enables participants to make connections. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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Comparative education through the LATTICE experience

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Comparative education through the LATTICE experience

Introduction

> In all societies, throughout human history, people have educated their children. Indeed, one of the fundamental characteristics of human civilization is a concern for the preparation of the next generation. From one generation to the next, we seek to pass on what we know and have learned, hoping to ensure not merely the survival of our offspring, but that of our culture as well.
>
> The history of education, as it has been conceived and taught in the United States (and generally in the West), has focused almost entirely on the ways in which our own educational traditions emerged, developed, and changed over the course of the centuries. This is, of course, understandable, but it means that we have ignored the many ways that other societies have sought to meet a number of the same challenges. ... An understanding of the ways that other people have tried to educate their children, as well as what counted as 'education' for them, may help us both to think more clearly about some of our own assumptions and values, and to become more open to alternative viewpoints about important educational matters. (Reagan, 1996, p.ix)

"The provision of an educational system of the highest possible quality is of such importance to each and every country that the field of comparative education has had a very important function in the expansion in education (Keeves,1995, p.170). Therefore, scholars have been scrutinizing national educational systems as never before (Rohlen, 1995). In addition to scholars, politicians and policy makers have also been strongly interested in international comparisons since they have realized that "national development is sustained by an educational system of high quality which provides not only a well-trained work force but also a well-educated citizenry" (Keeves,1995, p.169). In other words, they have realized that with the use of international achievement studies, they can obtain information on a great variety of issues that will help them abandon their insular view of schooling that has left countries such as the United States on the "periphery of the international education community" (Griffith & Medrich, 1992, p.477).

When looking at the results of such international studies, most researchers have correctly been focusing their attention on the reasons that account for the differences in the performance of the various countries (Stedman, 1994). The reason is because "an

educational system does not appear overnight, but develops gradually as do other societal relationships such as the state, the family and church which involve themselves with the school and education of the young" (Vos & Brits, 1990, p.31). Therefore, "in order to understand any education system, it is necessary to establish and describe all the determining factors (cultural, historical, geographical, socioeconomic, political etc) that influence the particular system" (Vos & Brits, 1990, p.16). In other words, an educational system needs to be described in context (Robinsohn, 1992). That is why recent international comparative studies that are taking place today, pay a lot of attention to

> ...the contextual detail that accompanies these surveys. Information on the cognitive, social, economic and public goals of other educational systems; description of curriculum and teaching methods; descriptions of ways students (and teachers) use time in and outside school; analyses of parent and student attitudes toward education; motivation to learn and perform well; explorations of how countries deal with students varying ability levels; and comparisons of the socio-economic context of educational systems- these topics are representative of the kind of comparative education studies that are attracting and increasing attention (Griffith & Medrich, 1992, p.477).

Because of the complexity of the factors influencing educational systems, some researchers such as Lapointe, Mead, & Phillips, (1989) believe that 'comparisons are odious', and that "they are difficult to make fairly accurately, especially when human behavior is involved" (p.9). "Even with the uniform procedures and careful monitoring, the goal of complete comparative comparability is difficult to attain" (Lapointe, Mead, & Phillips, 1989, p.9). One of the reasons is because "countries are not comparable in their social structure" (McLean, 1995, p.49). Another reason is because culture is a tricky issue since it shapes perceptions and influences the way institutions such as schools are formed and work (Rohlen, 1995, p.122). Therefore, for some researchers such as Robinsohn (1992), it is practically impossible to obtain a complete description of an educational system in its total social context.

Other researchers, however, such as Baker (1997) believe that valid cross-national comparisons concerning student scholastic achievement, are in fact, possible.

> We should not dismiss the assessments, therefore, because countries vary demographically; instead we should study these variations to determine their impact. In the future assessment should routinely desegregate results by race, region, language, and family background. No doubt, we will find striking differences in the achievement of different social classes and minority groups within each country (Stedman, 1997, p.12).

"If rigorous procedures are followed and if the limitations of comparisons are kept in mind, comparative studies can provide invaluable information" (Lapointe, Mead, & Phillips, 1989, p.9). "It is having adequate information about the larger international world that can help us deal with new and acute educational problems of today (Tsayang, 1990, p.5). Therefore, by looking at both the input and output of the school effectiveness picture, researchers can compare "how the efficiency of schools change as they are compared against schools operating in different educational systems" (Soteriou, Karahanna, Papanastasiou, & Diakourakis, 1998, p.72).

The amount of publicity that has been drawn to such comparisons today is so large, that "the trends on domestic achievement tests are no longer relevant because the salient reference groups are students in other nations (Bracey, 1996, p.5). The main basis for most international comparisons have been international survey studies, the results of which may not be easily accessible for any teacher to use, analyze and learn from. However, such information about foreign educational systems can easily be obtained by first or second hand experience through a project called LATTICE.

LATTICE

LATTICE, which stands for 'Linking All Types of Teachers to International Cross-Cultural Education' is a project that has been bringing together Michigan public school teachers, international students and internationally oriented faculty from Michigan State

University for four consecutive years. The format of LATTICE is such, that participants can learn about other educational systems and cultures through directed group discussion with international students and teachers, as well as by actually visiting classrooms and even teaching lessons.

Session Format

The actual format of the LATTICE monthly meetings is as follows: at the beginning of each session, a topic is presented which is aimed at triggering discussion between groups. The topics may range from how each of us have experienced racism, to how death is dealt with in different schools, in different countries, and cultures. At the end of each presentation, small group discussions take place that focus on assigned provocative questions that are related to the topic that has been presented. These discussions are very enriching since everyone shares their personal experiences and insights. The experiences vary greatly within each table. The reason is because special attention is paid so that the members of each table are as diverse as possible. This includes people that are from different countries, continents, races, as well as students and teachers and principals. In addition, the groups within each table are different every week so that everyone can get as much exposure from all the cultures that are represented in the LATTICE group.

After the small group discussions and a food break, all LATTICE members regroup, and a representative of each of the small groups shares some of the most intriguing conversations that took place in their groups. That is an effective and efficient way of learning about what discussions took place in the other tables without being too repetitious. At the end of each session, a 5-minute survey is passed out where

participants can provide information on what they have learned from each session, as well as what other topics they would like to discuss in future sessions. This allows LATTICE to be based on the interests of all members of the group.

By listening to how other cultures teach their children, every LATTICE participant notices not only the differences between the different educational systems, but also how similar every educational system is. A common remark from many of the LATTICE participants, for example, is that none of us are actually satisfied with the educational system we were brought up in, or teach in, and that we are all looking for new ideas to improve our educational systems. "Cross-cultural comparisons can help us discover characteristics of our own culture that we fail to notice because we are so familiar with them. Through such comparisons, our perceptions become clearer and sharper" (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992, p.16). International perspectives always provide better understanding of what works in schools and what doesn't (Stedman, 1994). Therefore, comparative education can be described as aiming "at the evaluation of national systems of education and education problems of different countries in the light of their relationship to all national, historical, cultural, economical, geographical and religious forces and factors. The purpose is to come to a deeper understanding of the functioning of education systems, which in turn may lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon education." (Vos & Brits, 1990, p.14).

Benefits of LATTICE

Exposes other cultures and coordinates resources

According to Griffith & Medrich (1992), all "our people must be as knowledgeable, as well as trained, as competent, and as inventive as those in any other nation" (Griffith & Medrich, 1992, p.476). However, "if people are to be productive members and responsible citizens of the 'global village', they must have some understanding of the world's diverse peoples' cultures, and places and of the factors that shape their interactions" (Lazer, 1992, p.1). "All our people, not just a few, must be able to think for a living, adapt to changing environments, and to understand the world

around them. They must understand and accept their responsibilities and obligations of citizenship. They must continually learn to develop new skills throughout their lives " (Griffith & Medrich, 1992, p.476). The reason is because "individual economies, governments, and ecosystems do not exist in isolation. Regions are linked by trade agreements, global markets, communication networks, political alliances, and international organizations (Lazer, 1992, p.1). Therefore, "the most difficult challenge may not be improving the quality of education for science and engineering majors, but providing a better education for all students- who represent the large majority- in a world requiring ever greater technological skills" (Rotberg, 1990, p.296).

However, in order to be able to teach about other people, places and cultures, we, as educators need to be aware of how other countries function in their educational systems, and especially in other people's daily lives. So, LATTICE is an excellent opportunity to gain insight on such matters. For example, food is a distinct characteristic of each culture. Therefore in the middle of each session, there is an international food break. For each session, different people volunteer to bring food from their culture, while they also describe what is the meaning of each item they brought. The food might be related to certain holidays, special occasions such as weddings and birthdays, etc. Therefore, these descriptions are another indirect way in which you can learn from each other's cultures. However, there are many cases in which teachers want to share their experiences about other cultures to their students. In this case, many of the LATTICE teachers invite international students to their classrooms. These Michigan State University students present their countries, culture and customs to these students. Learning about other countries is always much more interesting once you can put a face or some personal stories within that country's context. In this context, LATTICE is an excellent opportunity to coordinate resources that are available in our community.

Supplements international comparative reports with background information

International comparisons are "starting to be correctly valued for far more than test scores" (Griffith & Medrich, 1992). "Measurement of a country's level of educational achievement is merely a first and necessary step on the path toward finding out why countries differ in their levels of achievement" (Keeves,1995, p.173). "International

studies are most useful scientifically and politically when they are used to shed light on how and why a country produces a particular pattern of achievement" (Baker, 1997, p.16). "They seek to provide rich collections of data, sophisticated measures of student attainment, contextualized interpretation of the results, content-sensitive scaling without misleading aggregations of different items, and guidance of all data collection and interpretation by precisely stated models of education indicators and their relationships "(Schmidt & McKnight, 1995, p.337). In other words, they examine "the education outcomes in the light of different philosophies, different national characteristics described in terms of social, economic and political systems as well as different times" (Tsayang, 1990, p.4). Lattice also enables teachers to view results drawn from international studies within their context. Even though one can read about foreign educational systems through such international studies, one can comprehend those systems clearer once you have learned through LATTICE about the history, and culture of these countries. These factors might even help one determine how comparable certain factors such as teaching method are, across countries.

The results of international assessments should "provide teachers, school administrators, policy-makers, and taxpayers with information that helps to define the characteristics of successful student performance and suggests areas for possible improvement and change "(p.7). "Comparative studies could be regarded as a kind of needs assessment of a scientific approach to identifying possible problems and alternative solutions which could be made available to the policy maker (Tsayang, 1990, p.4). This can be done by coordinating and collecting information about education systems in other countries in order to establish a database that would help and guide international decision making (Tsayang, 1990). "We [researchers] need to look closely at how nations are restructuring their funding, governance, teaching and evaluation and determine what effects this is having on student learning" (Stedman, 1994, p.31). "Careful international comparative studies can help identify the factors that promote educational achievement and those that do not make a difference" (Bradburn & Gilford, 1990, p.3), as well as factors that correlate achievement with excellence in school performance (Griffith & Medrich, 1992, Lazer, 1992). "The analysis of the different educational systems could provide important basic theoretical frameworks, and therefore some predictive power..., about what needs to be done in educational

reforms" (Tsayang, 1990, p.4). Eventually, this would "help educators develop a much-needed, comprehensive approach to US school reform, one that would move us well past the simple and incomplete explanations that have too long captivated our policymakers" (Stedman, 1994, p.31). "Lets go on and focus our attention on the difficult public policy issues to be addressed rather than on comparisons and rankings (Rotberg, 1991, p.781).

Non competitive comparisons of educational systems

Other researchers, such as Rotberg (1991) are also concerned that through comparative education, policy makers will mainly focus on test scores rather than on more important questions concerning educational problems and on how students actually learn (Rotberg, 1991, Rohlen, 1995). "Cross-national comparisons-especially those involving many countries and measuring student attainments- always have run the risk of being interpreted as simple competitions with winners and losers. Within the communities that carry out such studies this is often referred to as regarding a study as 'a horse race'" (Schmidt & McKnight, 1995, p.337) or as "academic Olympics" (Stedman, 1997, p.5). However, even though researchers are aware that paying attention to the country's rank is inevitable, the rankings should not become the main focus of these studies (Baker, 1997, Lazer, 1992). Therefore, instead of asking questions about who is number one in comparative studies, the question should be: "'What makes a difference?' and what can we learn from different educational structures and institutional practices. This could support efforts in this country to improve the performance of students and improve the quality of the schools?" (Griffith & Medrich, 1992, p.483). In LATTICE, however, one can benefit from international comparisons without having to worry about competition. LATTICE is not interested in finding the best educational system. The purpose of LATTICE is to increase awareness that other educational systems and cultures do exist, as well as identifying characteristics of our own culture that might increase student learning.

Making conections

However, "it must be reemphasized that foreign educational practices cannot be summarily transplanted to other education systems with the hope that similar positive results may be obtained, as the national circumstances (nature, culture and communal motives) may differ radically from country to country" (Vos&Brits, 1990, p.28) .That is why LATTICE enables its participants to look at educational systems within an actual context. First, one can learn about other countries and their educational systems during the monthly group sessions. Later on, one can also visit those countries, and look at their educational system from an insider's perspective. With every LATTICE member you get to meet, you automatically form a link between them and their country. Therefore, it is not rare for LATTICE members to go to other countries (such as South Africa) in order to learn from each other.

Conclusion

This is not to say that international comparative studies are not useful. On the contrary, I believe that they have an invaluable contribution for the improvement of education worldwide. However, LATTICE extends even further. Therefore, teachers should only utilize these studies and their results as a starting point. Some of these studies, for example, may suggest that certain teaching methods are related to high achievement in high schools in Cyprus. This does not mean, however, that U.S. high school teachers should blindly adopt those teaching methods. That is why before applying any new teaching method that they have read about in journals, such as the ones used in Cyprus, a U.S. teacher could actually ask a LATTICE participant from Cyprus to describe the context in which education in Cyprus is placed in. That would help them determine if that method would be effective in their class within its own context or not.

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